

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2026)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE III. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE

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PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE



Performing Space Association University of the Peloponnese

2026

Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage

Arianna Chatziganou

doi: [10.12681/ps2023.9971](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.9971)

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Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage **A threshold experience of a performative paper**

Arianna Chatziganou

Independent researcher & performance artist

Abstract

The *Urban Vampire* project emerged just before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Athens and it has since engaged with the fragmented yet persistently undead urban space. Performative fragments focused specifically on transitional spaces within the urban landscape — the arcades [στοές] of downtown Athens — were assembled into the experimental short film *Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage*, presented within the context of performative presentations at the *Performing Space Conference 2025*. The film's core inquiry lies in revealing the bridging and connecting qualities of the arcades, both physically and metaphorically – the latter being the internal processes of initiation that unfold during the liminal passage from one point of public space to another — through the mystical quality that an arcade can hold. Drawing on psychogeography, autoethnography, performance writing and performance practice as its methodological framework, this article could have served as a written presentation of the theoretical background of the performative piece if a performative presentation itself had not already *taken space* at the conference. However, having performed the presentation, it is only fitting that this article continues that process and stands as another step within the research methodology — from a performance to performative presentation to performative paper.

Keywords: autoethnographic, liminal, urban, performance, video

Performative Paper: A Liminal Place to Be

Describing a performative piece in terms of its methodological framework, theoretical and philosophical background, its implementation and the discourse that follows is the conventional mode within the academic field for the performative arts. Yet, as Laura Cull (2012) discusses in relation to the problem of application, performers often find themselves justifying creative choices and seeking support from philosophical frameworks to legitimize their creativity. But what if within this very interstice, the space between creativity and academic performance, there lies a liminal zone of transformational creativity — a kind of alchemical process that holds the tension of the opposites (Jung, 1992)?

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan (1993) suggests that the undocumentable nature of performance necessitates new rules of writing if it is to preserve its ephemeral ontology. When performers are asked to write a paper about their performative work, they encounter a deeply alienating loneliness. During the creative process, they have creative impulses; during performance, they have an audience; and during a conference, they have fellow participants. But when they are asked to write about their performance, even the company of their creation fades. Alone and in a passage, the performer's body echoes Victor Turner's (1969) understanding of liminality — the state of being betwixt and between, suspended in transformation.

Figure 1

Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage, photo from the film (Arianna Chatziganou & Aspa Siokou)



A performative paper, thus, attempts to perform an artistic work in words, a close to impossible attempt, not only because of the performer-researcher's human limitations (linguistic, academic, physical, emotional) but because the main performative experience itself may transcend the world of words. In most cases, it was not stimulated by the world of words but rather by unconscious impulses that are explored through the making and words can often be only part of this exploration. A great example of this is poetry, which, although it consists of words, tends to feel as if words are only a constituent of the poem. How is someone to bring the body entity of the performer from the space of performance to 'on paper'? This process — navigating through loneliness, transformation and poetry, whether met with compassion or mockery, with lack of understanding or with ontological respect — cannot be shared with anyone else.

As a liminal entity undergoing initiation, the performer-researcher experiences multiple dissolutions of their identity, reaching a point where they hold neither the security of their former identity nor the liberating relief of their new identity. This cycle of consecutive dissolution and re-solution renders discourse on a performance mostly precarious, meaningless (in the sense that it has yet no assigned meaning and it is in the process of finding it) and, thus, alive, pulsing with the vitality of emergence.

Why begin a paper by talking about the impossibility of the paper? Why dwell on absence? Does absence mean non-existence when absence can more often than not intensify presence (Heidegger, 1962)? What would be the opposite of presence? Could omission perform a severance of presence? The reason why this paper begins by discussing its absence does not take from its willingness to become present and it thereby chooses to literally not omit anything and perform everything, even its own nothingness.

As Trinh Minh-ha (1989) proposes: "*Let's not express ourselves in sentences but think sentences*" (p.17).

Performative Presentation: Performing the Performance's Framework per se

The experimental short film 'Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage' premiered at the *Performing Space Conference 2025* under the category of performative presentations. Applying for this category seemed so intriguing but after being accepted the great question emerged: well, what is a performative presentation? Not being a performance nor a traditional presentation, the initial joy for a plethoric combination of both subsided. It was no longer a performance and a presentation. Quite the contrary, I could do neither a performance nor a presentation. That was a real challenge.

I arrived at the conference with a film and my notes referencing the great minds of performance theory. The days in the conference were passing and I was nowhere close to

what could be considered as a performative presentation. Not that I really knew what that was at that point. However, I could intuit what it was not. And there I was, having shot myself in the foot. Or so I thought.

On the day of my performative presentation, I carried both my notes and my film. The paper remained in my bag; the film was projected on the wall. I wore my Urban Vampire's costume and I stood between the bag and the wall. During, the preceding coffee break, I served coffee to attendees as the urban vampire. Some smiled in surprise, while others approached hesitantly. They seemed unsure whether they should ask for coffee or talk to me. Should they comment or just observe? Some acknowledged my presence, others did not. The break was over and they all entered the conference room. The chairs had already been randomly rearranged while we were all out. I needed the rearrangement to surprise both the people attending and me. I entered last.

Figure 2

Performative presentation of 'Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage', Performing Space 2025 Conference (photo by Alberto De Felipe Montero)



They were sitting, I was standing. I turned off the lights. The film started playing and I just had to make a choice. To find a chair in the whole chaos and just be. My body melted on the chair and, as my head tilted backwards, I could see myself on the screen upside

down. I had never watched the film upside down. What an amazing opportunity that had never even crossed my mind before, my creature hanging from the floor hovering above the arcades' skylights. I knew the words of my voice-over by heart, I could hear them through the speakers and I could feel their vibration within, like having two sources of sound crashing into each other in the space in-between. I did not talk. But in a way I spoke. The NASA sounds in the sound design were in harmony with the sound of my breath. I did not breathe. But in a way I respired. 'Is this your idea of performative presentation?' I wondered and Judith Butler (2006) echoed from far away: Are you saying "your inner world does (not) designate a topos"? (p. 171).

Figure 3

Performative Presentation of 'Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage', Performing Space 2025 Conference (photo by Alberto de Felipe Montero)



When the film ended, I stood up, opened the exit door and went out to the garden, into the sunlight. There I was, alone outside, having passed through every spatial layer of the conference. Not really knowing what I was doing in each one of them and then again, with a strange uncertainty, knowing very well. I crossed the garden walking. The exit behind me. I thought maybe I should run. But my feet said no, you walk. And then the entrance in front of me again. When I reentered the conference room, I found the people still looking out of the door I exited clapping, clapping who I was a little while ago. So strange to be experiencing my past and my present at the same time, as if the past and present self

merged for a moment in that conference space. Leaving my notes and the film fading into the background, immersing into the moment of not-knowing, my lonely walk and entering a new felt like a complete rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960).

The Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage

Since we began from nothingness, perhaps it is time to begin near the end, thus, “nullifying endings and beginnings” (Deleuze&Guattari, 1987, p.153). This filmic performance, part of the ongoing Urban Vampire project, originated in 2019 during a conference at the University of Thessaly. Invited by Dr. Neoklis Mantas to contribute a performance about the city, I presented a performative piece of a vampire performing lonely Christmas rituals in a world that was collapsing.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the project acquired uncanny resonance and the urban vampire’s weird suggestion of *modus operandi* came to life. One of the first forbidden acts was flânerie — aimless wandering. But, as art venues closed, there was no other place for a performer than the street. Like a vampire, I wandered through the city’s void. Lefebvre (2004) would have seen in this a subversive act, a rhythm analysis of resistance. Clad in costume, I tried to embody Wolff’s (1985) vision of the invisible flâneuse by becoming most visible. The urban vampire did not go on a traditional bloodthirsty quest to feed on life but on a quest to feed on the absence of life or, even more accurately, the imprint of life. Just like the vampire stands for neither life nor death but the imprint of both. And this could be juxtaposed with Glazier’s (2022) reminiscences of the Baudelaire’s “ego a-thirst for a non-ego” (p. 226).

Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage focuses specifically on spaces of transition within the urban landscape and explores such charged thresholds encompassing old print shops, contemporary retail stores, offices, service providers, the Varvakeios market and a photography darkroom. It was filmed in the arcades that stretch between the commercial heart of the city of Athens and its historical sites — hence forming its shadowed, transitional zones. Passing through an arcade is rendered an initiation process for the body entity and, as such, what it seeks to reveal is the variety of experiences the body goes through, the implications of such liminal public spaces and the psychogeographical narrative of this urban element. An arcade looks like an urban exile and as Carter (1979) writes in her short vampiric story *The Lady of the House of Love*, “the end of exile is the end of being” (p.106). According to Berardi’s (2015) etymological analysis of experience, this experience of the arcade includes the going through, perishing and trying out.

The urban vampire moves through the arcades with their reflective glass, the steel surfaces and the distorting skylights that become vessels of loss, memory and

metamorphosis. Through every passage, the arcade becomes a rite, a negotiation between presence and absence, the living and the dead, the self and the city. The inflated body entity of the urban vampire absorbs the residue of lives, histories and psychic transformations of the arcade's life. And, in reverse, what is left behind, even in the most minor transition is never truly lost. It lingers like a trace or offering in the architecture, thus adding another bit, or maybe beat, to the psychic archive of the arcade.

Through this embodied journey, the urban vampire becomes the witness and experiment of the city's alchemical processes, undergoing this transformative experience in its own form. As Benjamin (1999) would have more eloquently expressed this, "All this was the arcade in our eyes. And it was nothing of all of this (...) It was not decline but transformation" (p.874).

Figure 4

Urban Vampire: A Rite of Passage, photo from the film (Arianna Chatziganou & Aspa Siokou)



Conclusion

What was supposed to be a paper of documentation took a weird turn into a performative writing experiment. The experimental short film, centered on Athens' transitional spaces, stimulated new questions about artistic research on transition leading to a process of continual passage. From performance to presentation to paper, writing can become another form of performance, another arcade to cross — instead of writing about the performance actually writing the performance. This experimental writing ritual, resonating with the core principles of performance writing, suggests that, in artistic research, the methodology itself immerses into the research question which, in turn, permeates every step to mold new forms

of research practice on paper. It can feel like a non-sense or extremely exposing way to face the academy but why should artistic immersion be allowed in certain contexts and in some others not? How could we be speaking about artistic research severing the artist's tools and processes from the moment their performative piece has finished? And lastly, how could I be presenting and talking about my artistic research on transitional urban space evoking the process of psychic fragmentation, metataxis and transformation, if I do not embody them in every research step I take?

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